

## THE VEDA-VYĀSA MYTH

BY

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The author of the Mahābhārata is not only the author of a great Epic, or even of an Encyclopaedia Indica, but a prophet, who, indeed, revealed a fifth Veda for the guidance of posterity. Few even among the great sages of antiquity can lay claims to such high-sounding pretensions, or deserve a higher praise. But apotheosis, especially Indian, frequently rises up to such ethereal heights that in that dimness of epic style and grandeur it becomes a hard task to discriminate between just and unjust claims. Vyāsa, according to the Mahābhārata and several Purāṇas, e. g. Viṣṇu and Bhāgavata, received the appellation Veda-Vyāsa on account of his dividing the original Veda into four Samhitās<sup>1</sup> and distributing them among his four pupils, viz., Paila, Vaiśampāyana, Jaimini and Sumantu. Now here a question arises: is this epic legend in consonance with well-preserved Vedic traditions? And, if not, how did such a preposterous claim come to be preferred in books which profess due allegiance to the Vedas? A careful investigation into the origin and development of this Veda-Vyāsa Myth will furnish, perhaps, the best example of the way in which Purāṇic writers, as a class, have superseded, defied, twisted or perverted, old and carefully preserved Vedic traditions in order to glorify a particular personage or religious creed. In the present case it is the Bhāgavata-dharma, or Pāñcarātra Vaiṣṇavism which is sought to be exalted by the inventor or inventors of the above-mentioned Purāṇic legend. It is of the highest importance, therefore, to examine in detail the statement about the division of the original *one* Veda into four, and the subsequent distribution of those four Vedas among his own chosen disciples, by Vyāsa.

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जातमात्रश्च यः सद्य इष्ट्यां देहमवीवृधत् ।

वेदांश्चाधिजगे साङ्गान्सेतिहासान्महायशाः ॥ ( म. भा. ध्या. प. ६०-३ )

विद्यामेकं चतुर्धा यो वेदं वेदाविदां वरः । ( Ibid. ६०-५ )

तपसा ब्रह्मचर्येण व्यस्य वेदं सनातनम् । ( Ibid. १-५५ )

वेदान् विद्यास यस्मात् स रेदव्यासुः इतीतिः ।

C. V. Vaidya accepts the above tradition with certain reservations. To quote his own words: "While accepting the tradition of the compilation of the Vedas by Vyāsa, we may, however, reject that part of it which credits him with compiling the Atharva text also." <sup>1</sup> And again, "We may also reject the idea suggested later (especially in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa) that Vyāsa taught the four Vedas to four different pupils, viz. Ṛgveda to Paila, Yajurveda to Vaiśampāyana, Sāmaveda to Jaimini and Atharvaveda to Sumantu." <sup>2</sup> Such, however, is the strength and tenacity of a well-established and oft-repeated tradition that it scarcely leaves any room for doubt in which alone a critical enquiry can start. If Vedic evidence is to be believed, Vyāsa had nothing to do with the four Vedas. And, fortunately, that evidence is neither meagre nor indecisive. The references to the *three* Vedas in the various Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads are so numerous, clear and unmistakable, that the statement in the Epic--too often repeated in the Purāṇas--viz. that there was but *one* Veda in the beginning, and that Vyāsa divided it into four, appears as quite ridiculous, if not worse. There is not the slightest evidence in any of the above-mentioned works of high and indisputable antiquity to show that there was only one Veda in the beginning. That that one Veda was Yajurveda is a nefarious addition made to the Epic legend by the writer, (or interpolator) of the Viṣṇu-Purāṇa, who undoubtedly must have been an adherent of that school and whose bigoted zeal tries to elevate that Veda over the other Vedas, especially over the Ṛgveda.<sup>3</sup> As against this, one has but to read Śāyana's Introduction to the Ṛgveda-bhāṣya in order to appreciate the great dignity and veneration in which that Veda is held by the other Vedas. And yet, Śāyana, as is well-known, was himself a follower of the Taittirīya school of the Black Yajurveda. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa persistently states that the three Vedas emanated<sup>3</sup> from the three gods, viz. Agni, Vāyu

<sup>1</sup> His. Sans. Lit.: Vol, I p. 52

<sup>2</sup> एक आसीद्यजुर्वेदस्तं चतुर्धा व्यकल्पयत् । ( वि. प. ३-३. ११ )

<sup>3</sup> ( १ ) तेभ्यस्तप्तेभ्यस्त्रयो वेदा अजायन्तमिहैर्ऋग्वेदे वायोर्यजुर्वेदः सूर्याग्निमवेदः । ( श. प. भा. ११-४-८-३ ) ( २ ) एवं वशिष्ठस्य महतो भूतस्य निःश्रितमेतद्यजुर्वेदो यजुर्वेदः सामवेदोऽथर्व-  
जिरसः : ( बृह. उप. २।४।१० ) ( ३ ) ऋग्वेदं वाव भगवो अभ्यमि यजुर्वेदं सामवेदं etc. ( छा. उ. ५ ) यो ब्रह्माणं विदधाति पूर्वं यो वै वेदांश्च प्रहिणोति तस्मै ( भे. उ. ६-१० )

and Ravi. Manu, following the same Vedic tradition, repeats the statement in his *Smṛti*.<sup>1</sup> In the 'Chāndogya Upaniṣad, too, Nārada enumerates the three Vedas as the three distinct heads of study, while recounting the subjects in which he had already gained proficiency. It is impossible to imagine that these works are later than the Mahābhārata, or that the personages like Nārada mentioned in them, are posterior to Vyāsa. Evidently, therefore, the three Vedas existed long before the Epic period. Indeed, the Śatapatha, as C. V. Vaidya points out, refers to the Rgveda-Saṁhitā as we possess it now, thus proving the great antiquity of that Veda. Nor is there the slightest hint in any of the Vedic works to prove anything like a division of the Vedas. Then there is, again, the most glaring contradiction in the Epic itself, where its author is credited with that glorious work. First it is stated that he studied the *Vedas* ( mark the plural ) ; and then next comes the amazing statement that he divided the *original Veda* ( observe the singular ) into four !

Again, if Vyāsa had had any connection with the Vedas, he would have been surely included among the venerable Ācāryas or gurus to whom *Tarpana* ( water-libation ) is due in the Brahmayañña. But his name is conspicuous by its absence, though those of his *supposed* pupils are mentioned in the Grhya-sūtra of Āśvalāyana : ( सुमन्तुजैमिनीवैशंपायनंपल्लवभाष्यभारतमहाभारत-धर्मचार्याः । ) If, as the Epic says, Vyāsa had been the Guru of Sumantu and others, his name would have certainly occurred in the list, and that too before those of his pupils. In stead, we find a vague reference to the author or authors of the Bhārata and Mahābhārata. Certainly Āśvalāyana, like all ancient writers of India, knew what belongs to the dignity of the Guru, and therefore, the omission of Vyāsa's name from the above list is quite significant. It is worthy of note, too, that personages like Śākala, Bāṣkala and others are individually mentioned with due honour, and thus justice is done to all those who had any connection with the *Śākhās* of the Rgveda. The Caranavyūha ascribed to Śaunaka, though not a very ancient work, knows nothing of the Epic

अग्निवायुरविर्भ्यस्तु त्रयं ब्रह्म सनातनम् ।

दुर्बोह यज्ञसिद्धयर्थमुपयजुःसामलक्षणम् ॥ ( म. स्मृ. १-२३ )

legend, and consequently Vyāsa's name is nowhere to be found in it. It would appear as though the above *Sūtra* of Āśvalāyana was taken by the inventors of the Epic legend as a basis for the idea of the four-fold division of the original Veda, clearly to make the four Ācāryas whose names are jointly mentioned in it as the four pupils of the mythical Vyāsa. For, while the names of Vaiśampāyana and Jaimini are indisputably associated with the Yajus and Sama Vedas, there is very little or no evidence to prove the connection of Paila and Sumantu with Ṛk. and the Atharva Vedas, respectively. And are we to believe, as the legend requires us to do, that Āśvalāyana, who belongs to the Rgvedic group, would be so foolish or negligent as to put the name of the recipient of the Atharva-veda at the head and that of the recipient of the Rgveda at the tail? This would be sheer infidelity to his own Veda on the part of the *Sūtrakāra*. Vaiśampāyan's relation to Vyasa, again, as described in the legend, is so flagrantly absurd that it presents an anachronism which is at once hopeless and inexplicable. For Yājñavalkya, who is described therein as Vaiśampāyana's pupil, is, according to all Vedic, Epic and Purāṇic evidence, a contemporary of King Janaka of Videha. His glory is sung in the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads of the Black as well as of the white Yajurveda. According to the Epic and Purāṇic chronology, he lived in the Tretā-Yuga, while Vyāsa, who is said to be the guru of Vaiśampāyana, and hence the great guru of Yājñavalkya, is a contemporary of the heroes of the Mahābhārata, and, therefore, lived at the end of the Dvāpara-Yuga! Indeed, there are a number of clear statements in the Epic and Purāṇas to the effect that Vyāsa lived at the close of the Dvāpara age. Thus the grand-pupil, instead of coming *after* the grand-guru, *precedes* him by a whole *Yuga*! But even if we discard the Epic chronology and accept the historical view, the antiquity of Yājñavalkya to Vyāsa remains unimpaired. For there are a number of legends and anecdotes narrated in the Śānti and Anuśāsana<sup>1</sup> Parvans of the Epic, wherein Yājñavalkya and Janaka figure as ancient personages while the narrator is Vaiśampāyana! The attempt to make Vyāsa

<sup>1</sup> ( म.भा. शां. प. अ. ३१५ )

the guru of Vaiśampāyana is one of those inventions which sacrifice chronology to hero-worship and literary romance. That Yājñavalkya was a contemporary, and even a pupil, of Vaiśampāyana is quite probable, though the legend about the name Taittirīya is quite fantastic. For they appear as the great leaders of the two rival schools into which the Yajurveda was divided, the guru representing the old orthodox school, and the gifted disciple introducing a reform.

From references to Vaiśampāyana and his pupils in Pāṇini we gather a few interesting facts of great historical value. It is evident from Sūtra IV-3-104 (कलापिवैशंपायनान्तेवासिभ्यश्च ।) that Kalāpi and other pupils of Vaiśampāyana became founders of different schools of the Black Yajurveda. The pupils of Kalāpi were four in number, while those of Vaiśampāyana were nine, as the *Kāśikā* enumerates them :

हरिदुरेपां प्रथमस्ततश्छगलितुम्बुरु ।  
उलपन चतुर्थेन कालापकमिहोच्यते ॥  
आलम्बिश्चरकः प्राचां पलङ्गकमलाबुधौ ।  
अचाभारुणिताण्ड्याश्च मध्यमीयास्त्रयोऽपरे ॥  
व्यामायन उदीच्येषु उक्तः कटकलापिनोः ।

In accordance with the rule laid down in the preceding *Sūtra* (तेन प्रोक्तम् ।) it is evident that different schools of the Yajurveda were known from the names of the founders, e. g. आलम्बिनः, आरुणिनः, ताण्डिनः etc. The evidence of the grammarians is highly authentic and reliable, in as much they were concerned with the designations which had come into vogue in their time, and were not interested in the invention of names, like the mythologists. The *Kāśikā* further remarks : चरक इति वैशंपायनस्याख्या । तत्संबन्धेन सर्वे तदन्तर्वासिनश्चरका इत्युच्यन्ते । Again, it is evident from *Sūtra* IV, 3, 102 (तिन्निरिवरतन्तुसण्डिकोखाच्छण् ।) that Tittiri was the name of an Ācārya or founder of a school, and that, in consequence, his followers derived the title Taittirīya. This little piece of evidence exposes the hollowness of the Purāṇic legend founded on that name and inserted in the Viṣṇu and other Purāṇas. It is, again, highly significant that Pāṇini does not mention Vyāsa as a प्रवक्ता of any or all Veda-śākhās. The *taddhita* form 'Vaiyāsika' is derivable according to a *vṛtika* of Kātyāyana. It is clear at any rate from the Mahābhārata itself that king Janaka and

**Yājñavalkya**—the enlightened patron and the enlightened protégé—are regarded by the narrator of the Epic, **Vaiśampāyana**, as very ancient personages. The *Bhagavadgītā* also mentions the king as an old exemplary philosopher—king. Evidently, therefore, the Purāṇic legend about the relation between Vyāsa, **Vaiśampāyana** and **Yājñavalkya** is a travesty of facts, and seriously compromises the authenticity and antiquity of Vedic traditions.

Jaimini's relation with Vyāsa is equally unhistorical, and the Purāṇic legend has made matters more complicated by identifying the latter with **Bādarāyaṇa**. Most modern scholars, happily, do not give credence to this identity. It is a fact especially to be borne in mind that no two writers could be so dissimilar to one another as the author of the Epic and the author of the *Vedānta-Sūtra*. For, while the former displays a most conciliatory attitude towards the different creeds and systems, the latter clearly betrays a most uncompromising spirit in dealing with all systems and sects which deviate even an iota from the teaching of the Śruti. Even the most superficial reader of the *Brahma-Sūtra* will not fail to observe **Bādarāyaṇa's** stern and uncompromising attitude towards the **Sāṅkhya** doctrine, which, with certain restrictions, is accommodated in the Epic and the *Gītā*. His antagonism towards the less orthodox schools—the **Vaiśeṣika**, for example—is still more fierce. And can any one imagine even for a moment that the author of the Epic, who ardently espouses the **Pāṇcarātra** creed *in toto*, is the same as the author of the *Brahma-Sūtra*, who criticises at least a portion of it in his work? The zeal of the *Sūtrakāra* is thus the zeal of a Puritan who summarily dismisses all non-vedic tenets as mere subterfuge. The identity of these two writers rests on a tradition that Vyāsa assumed the discipleship of the great Vedantic teacher, **Bādari**, and under that designation, i. e. **Bādarāyaṇa**, wrote the *Sūtra*-work. The writers or revisers of the *Purāṇas* never troubled themselves about the harmony of doctrines, or of time and place; and went straightway to their business of reconciling the irreconcilable, and asserting the improbable. Once Vyāsa were identified with **Bādarāyaṇa**, it follows, as a matter of course, that Jaimini, the pupil, wrote the

Pūrva-mīmāṃsā, while the teacher reserved for himself the Uttara-mīmāṃsā. Śaṅkarācārya, however, does not seem to accept the identity; for in his *bhāṣya* on III, 3, 32 he refers to the Epic-legend, viz. that the sage, Apāntaratamas,<sup>1</sup> was re-born as Kṛṣṇa-dvaipāyana, just between the end of the Dvāpara, and the beginning of the Kali, Yugas. It is reasonable to expect here that if, in his opinion, the author of the Sūtra were the same as the author of the Epic, he would have suggested the identity in this connection. But he does not do so, and we may, therefore, suppose that he regarded the two authors as two different Ācāryas. This is, of course, only a conjecture and cannot be considered as, in any way, decisive. But it is certain, at any rate, that Śaṅkarācārya does not tacitly assume the identity of the two authors, as his rivals like Rāmānuja, and his own commentators like Govindānanda and Vācaspati Miśra, do. Evidently, therefore, these latter writers follow the tradition which had come into vogue since the revival of Purāṇic Hinduism. On the assumption of the identity of Bādarāyaṇa with Vyāsa the chronological tangle becomes even more complicated. For, the former refers not only to the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad in which Yājñavalkya so prominently figures, but also to its two recensions viz., Kāṇva and Mādhyandina.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, therefore, the author of the Brahmasūtra lived centuries after the great sage, who started a new school of the Yajurveda.

It will easily be perceived from the foregoing discussion that the Vedic tradition hardly knows of any such person as Vyāsa or Dvaipāyana, though the name of Vyāsa occurs once in the Taittiriya Āraṇyaka.<sup>3</sup> As to the division of the one original Veda into four, it has been clearly proved that that part of the statement is openly in conflict with the clearest and most unequivocal evidence furnished by the Śruti literature itself. Still more inconsistent and full of contradictions is the other part of that

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<sup>1</sup> तथाहि अपान्तरतमा नाम वेदाचार्यः पुराणसिर्विष्णुनियोगात् कलिद्वापरयोः संघो कृष्णद्वैपायनः संवधूयेति स्मरन्ति ।

Vide Mahābhārata, Śānti Parvan, Ch. 350

शरीरश्रोमयेऽपि हि भेदेनैवमधीयते ( ब्र. सू. १-२-२० )

तै. आ. १-९-३५

statement, namely, that Yājñavalkya was junior to Vyāsa by one generation. The inventor of the Veda-Vyāsa legend, whoever he was, makes a feeble attempt to explain away the above objections (Śānti p. ch. 350). For in the Mahābhārata we come across a certain sage of the name of Apāntaratamas who was specially appointed by god Viṣṇu for the division and distribution of the different Vedas and their Śākhās. But, unfortunately, that holy sage is as unknown to Vedic literature as his future incarnation—to wit, that Veda-Vyāsa himself! The Viṣṇu Purāṇa goes a step further and makes the bold avowal that there have been a number of Veda-Vyāsas, though not designated as such, who were entrusted with the holy work of the distribution and re-arrangement of the Vedas! The Purāṇa actually enumerates 28 such sages who lived in bygone ages! Thus, on this view, the Veda-Vyāsa is not so much an individual as a perpetual or intermittent institution! All such explanation only tends to make confusion worse confounded. The Vedic tradition, going back to a much earlier period than the Epic or Purāṇic legend, is strongly supported by the internal evidence of the whole Vedic literature and is in open conflict with the latter in every respect. The latter, indeed, has the rare merit, or good fortune, of finding universal acceptance by later Brahmanism, thanks to the popularity of the Epics and Purāṇas. But popularity can hardly atone for historical inaccuracies, and can never be urged as a criterion of truth or authoritativeness.

In order to understand the growth of the Veda-Vyāsa myth it is necessary to observe the close relation between Vedicism or early Brahmanism, and the Bhāgavata or Pāñcarātra Vaiṣṇavism. It must be stated here at the outset that the Bhāgavata-dharma was a spontaneous reform arising from within Vedicism, and not a revolt against it from without, like Jainism or Buddhism. Naturally the amalgamation of the two is so complete that it is

<sup>1</sup> अपान्तरतमा नाम सुतः स्वार्थभुवः प्रभुः ।  
तेन भिन्नास्ततो वेदा मनोः स्वार्थभुवान्तरे ॥  
तत्राप्यनेकधा वेदान्भेत्स्यते तपसान्वितः ।

कृष्णे युगे च संप्राप्ते कृष्णवर्णो भविष्यति ॥ ( म. भा. शां. प. ३५० )

<sup>2</sup> अष्टाविंशतिरित्येते वेदव्यासाः पुरातनाः । ( वि. पु. ३-३-९ )



very difficult sometimes to distinguish between the earlier and the later strata even in connection with rites which are unquestionably of Vedic origin, and preponderantly Vedic in character. Thus the *Śrāddha* rite, as now performed, includes certain Purāṇic stanzas which can be traced to the *Bhagavadgītā* or to the *Harivamśa*.<sup>1</sup> Even more remarkable is the conclusion of all such rites by the recitation of the *R̥k*: वषट् ते विष्णव्यास आ ऊणोसि etc. ( R. V. VII, 99, 5 ) which embodies a fervent prayer to god Viṣṇu, and is, for that reason, regarded with special veneration by later or Post-Vedic Brahmanism. But the climax of the tendency of Vedicism towards Vaiṣṇavism is to be found in the fact that the sacred syllable 'Om', so glorified in the Upaniṣads, takes now the prefix 'Hari', and becomes 'Hari-om' to mark the beginning of Vedic studies and recitations'. Indeed this compound of 'Hari' and 'Om' most aptly represents the union of the earlier Vedicism and later Vaiṣṇavism. Sometimes a word reveals more than a whole discourse or chapter. And all this is so deep-rooted and wide-spread that nobody now thinks that it had ever been otherwise. Manu, however, enjoins only the bare 'pranava' or 'Om' without any prefix in his *Smṛti*.<sup>2</sup> Vyāsa alias Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana was unquestionably the most glorious apostle or exponent of the Bhāgavata-dharma-and it may be said without fear of contradiction that later Vaiṣṇavism, whether of the Pāñcarātra type or otherwise (*Smārta*), is a creed which distinctly bears his stamp. Notwithstanding certain doctrinal differences like the *Catur-vyūha*, which is inconsistent with the general trend of Upaniṣadic philosophy, and which, for that reason, is criticized in the *Vedānta-sūtra*, the Bhāgavata or Pāñcarātra creed is in the closest relation with old Vedicism, and is also the most popular one throughout India. For, in the first place, its fidelity to the parental stock is genuine and unmistakable; and, secondly, even the non-vedic tenets like the *Caturvyūha* which it harbours are comparatively unimportant and are hardly insisted

<sup>1</sup> ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविः etc. Bh. G. IV, 24; also the stanzas सप्तव्याधा दशारण्ये ( V. I. दशार्णिष्ठ ) ( ह. वं. ); हरिर्दिता हरिर्भोक्ता etc.; चतुर्भिश्च चतुर्भिश्च द्वाभ्यां पञ्च-भिरेव च । etc.

upon. Thus in its transcendental purity we find it in the *Bhagavadgītā*, which has nothing sectarian about it, and which, therefore, lays claims to the highest authority among the *Smṛtis*, and ranks only next to the *Śruti*. Even in the *Mahābhārata* one cannot but perceive the spirit of tolerance and harmony towards *Śaivism*, *Durgā-worship* etc., though the leading creed is *Vaiṣṇavism*—*Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa-worship*. *Vyāsa*, the author of the grand Epic and the *Gītā*, naturally came to be covered with a glory which may justly be called divine. But perfectly divine it could not be, unless the sage-author were associated with the holy *Vedas*. In all probability, it was with this aim in view that the school of *Sūta* and *Romaharṣaṇa*—the founders of the *Veda-Vyāsa* myth—invented the legend about the division of the original *Veda* into four books, properly designated and diligently assigned to his four disciples, by the venerable guru, “*Vyāsa*.” That they aimed at making him the fountain of all knowledge—past, present and future—is evident from the several claims which are so eloquently put forth on his behalf in the Epic and outside it: ‘*यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न तत् कश्चित् ।*’; ‘*व्यासोऽद्विष्टं जगत्सर्वं ।*’; ‘*अष्टादशपुराणानां कर्ता सत्यवती-सुतः ।*’ etc. But the *Veda* is eternal, and a rigid adherence to it is enjoined by the ancient sages who look upon it as the only sovereign source of all ‘*dharma*’, i. e. Law and Knowledge. The originators of the *Veda-Vyāsa* myth, therefore, could not be content with making him only the author of a ‘*Fifth Veda*’, but fathered upon him even a higher distinction, viz., the title to the division of the original one *Veda* into four, and the distribution of the different *Śākhās* among his disciples. In doing so, however they completely perverted the earlier and genuine Vedic tradition as has been already shown above. Secondly, their bold attempt in creating this myth detracts, in a considerable degree, from the antiquity of the whole Vedic literature. And thirdly, and lastly, the statement is a source of clear self-contradictions and glaring anachronisms. Nevertheless the claims of the author of the original *Bhārata* and *Gītā* to divine honour and glory remain undiminished, in spite of the above drawbacks of the *Purāṇic* legend.